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SUBJECT: LAMPEDUSA: THE TINY ITALIAN ISLAND THAT LOOMS LARGE FOR
MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES

REF: A) TRIPOLI 391 (NOTAL), B) ROME 437, C) ROME 438, D) ROME 439
NAPLES 00000064 001.2 OF 004

Sensitive - Handle Accordingly

¶1. (SBU) Summary: During a May 13 visit to Italy's southernmost territory, the island of Lampedusa, we observed a well-run migrant detention center that provides humane treatment, food and medical care to those who arrive by boat from North Africa. While the camp has suffered from severe overcrowding in recent years, the GOI's controversial new policy of turning migrant boats back to Libya before they reach Italian waters meant the center had only a couple dozen detainees during our visit. Housing conditions are austere and in bad shape, especially following arson by inmates in February that destroyed over 40 percent of the available beds. The outspoken mayor was highly critical of the GOI's policies, asserting that Lampedusans are outraged with Premier Berlusconi. The UNHCR is extremely critical of the push-back policy, noting that Libya is not a party to the UN Refugee Convention; authorities told us that women arrive on Lampedusa asserting they were raped and mistreated in Libyan detention centers. Following our visit, DefMin La Russa controversially criticized the UNHCR as worthless. It is likely that some bona fide refugees will be unable to have asylum claims processed. Embassy Rome septel will report on changes to Italian immigration law that will further affect conditions on Lampedusa and other migrant holding centers.

An Island Closer to Africa than Europe

¶2. (U) The tiny, windswept island of Lampedusa is Italy's southernmost territory. The 9.8-square-mile land mass is only 70 miles from Tunisia and 127 miles from Sicily; geologically, it is part of Africa. Its 6,720 residents subsist mainly on fishing and tourism; in recent years, Lampedusa has averaged 100,000 tourists per year. Due to its proximity to North Africa, it is also an entry point for seaborne migrants. In 2008, around 33,000 arrived by boat, and so far in 2009 there have been around 6,000 arrivals. Virtually all of those voyages

embarked from Libya. Until 1992, the U.S Navy maintained a small communications base on the island.

Mayor: Lampedusans Oppose GOI Policies, Smell a Rat in Italy-Libya Accord

¶3. (SBU) The outspoken mayor of Lampedusa, Bernardino De Rubeis, was highly critical of the GOI's immigration policies when we met him on the island May 13. Like many Italian politicians, De Rubeis has changed party affiliation several times; he is currently a member of the Sicily-based Movement for Autonomy, which is in alliance with Premier Silvio Berlusconi's People of Liberty Party. The central government's decision to toughen immigration laws -- including making irregular immigration a punishable crime, and extending the allowable detention time of illegal immigrants from two to six months (septel) -- has outraged De Rubeis and his fellow Lampedusans. The mayor recounted that since desperate migrants began arriving on the island in large numbers seventeen years ago, Lampedusans have received them with open arms. The government's pursuit of anti-immigrant policies, spurred by Berlusconi's coalition partner, the Northern League, is totally at odds with Lampedusa's tradition of dealing with the humanitarian issue. Five thousand residents turned out for a recent protest against the new policies, De Rubeis told us.

¶4. (SBU) De Rubeis also condemned Libyan leader Muammar al-Gaddafi as unreliable and irresponsible. He scoffed at an August 2008 agreement under which Italy and Libya will soon

NAPLES 00000064 002.2 OF 004

begin joint patrols to interdict migrant boats departing Libyan territory, speculating that al-Gaddafi and Berlusconi had made a secret deal that such operations would only be enforced until after the June 6-7 European Parliament elections. (Comment: He did not elaborate on what benefit al-Gaddafi might obtain from such a deal. End comment.) De Rubeis also blasted as inhumane the GOI's new policy of turning interdicted migrant boats back to Libya before they reach Italian territory (ref A).

Conditions at the Center: Humane, But Housing in Bad Shape

¶5. (U) The migrant detention center, now designated by the GOI as a Center for Identification and Expulsion, is overseen by the Interior Ministry. Most of the migrants arriving on the island spend less than a week there, after which they are moved to larger centers in Caltanissetta (Sicily) or Crotone (Calabria). The majority of arrivals come from Tunisia, Somalia, Eritrea and Nigeria, though there are also significant numbers from Mali, Morocco, Algeria, Egypt, Pakistan and India. Around 75 percent of the arrivals request asylum, and around half of those receive some form of protection. Economic migrants, once identified, are presented with orders to voluntarily depart Italy. Few return to their countries of origin; most move on to other EU states (particularly France, Germany, Netherlands and Scandinavian countries), while some stay illegally in Italy. Forced repatriation is rare, according to the IOM.

¶6. (U) At times over the past two years, overcrowding at the detention center has become so severe that states of emergency were declared, and NGOs severely criticized conditions there. In January, 2009 the UNHCR expressed concern over the cramped conditions, noting that many detainees were sleeping on the ground under plastic sheets, and in March Amnesty International decried conditions at the center as "inhumane," and charged that migrants were not getting a fair hearing on refugee claims. Our visit to the center coincided with the GOI's new policy of turning back interdicted migrant boats to Libya, so there were only about two dozen male detainees at the center when we arrived -- a far cry from only three months ago, when 2,000 people were jammed into a camp built for 850.

¶7. (U) Care of the inmates has been contracted to a private organization that provides round-the-clock medical attention and food. All migrants are screened by physicians on arrival; many are treated for shock, sunstroke, dehydration and infections from the voyage. Police are on hand to provide security and to identify the migrants and their country of origin, a process that is often unsuccessful. The UNHCR, IOM, Red Cross, Doctors Without Borders and Save The Children all maintain a presence at the center. Inmates also receive clothes and a weekly phone card worth five euros. There are a number of interpreters who speak Arabic, French, English and other languages.

¶8. (SBU) Our impression is that migrants are treated humanely. Women and children are held at a separate center that we did not see (at the former U.S. Navy base), but the UNHCR and IOM representatives did not report any problems there. The main problem with the center is the housing conditions: aluminum shelters hold around twelve bunk beds with thin foam mattresses in cramped rooms. Detainees have ripped out lighting fixtures and covered the walls with graffiti. And in February of this year, a group of reportedly Tunisian migrants set fire to part of the camp, destroying a shelter that held 330 beds (now only 473 remain, though the burned pavilion is being rebuilt and should be completed in July). Occasionally inmates escape from the center, but return when they realize they are on a small island and the camp is their only option.

UNHCR Blasts Push-Back Policy

NAPLES 00000064 003.2 OF 004

¶9. (SBU) The IOM and UNHCR representatives told us that there are no incentives to keep illegal economic migrants from entering Italy. Many of those who arrive on Lampedusa are never positively identified, and the diplomatic and consular officials of the countries of origin are generally uncooperative. As noted above, when their detention period is over (two months until now), most migrants ignore expulsion orders and disappear -- many to other EU countries, some to other parts of Italy. A number of unaccompanied minors (virtually all males between 16 and 18 years old) also vanish; while some NGOs have expressed concern about this, IOM is convinced that these young people flee to find work and are probably not victims of traffickers. Forced repatriation is rare due to budget constraints and the difficulty in determining nationalities.

¶10. (SBU) The UNHCR is deeply concerned over the new policy of turning migrant boats back to Libya, noting that Libya is not a party to the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention and does not have a national asylum policy in place. Both Italian

authorities at the camp and UNHCR/IOM personnel told us that many women arrive on Lampedusa complaining they had been raped and/or mistreated at Libyan migrant detention facilities. A few days after our visit, the head of the UNHCR office in Rome, Laura Boldrini, condemned the new policy and complained that the High Commission's unofficial representatives in Libya do not have access to all of Libya's holding camps. DefMin Ignazio La Russa responded publicly during a May 17 visit to Tripoli that the UNHCR "is not worth a dried fig," and accused Boldrini of being an "inhuman or criminal Communist." This prompted the UN High Commissioner, Antonio Guterres, to blast La Russa for an "unacceptable personal attack." This was followed by Berlusconi's assertion to the media May 19 that it is more humane to push the migrants back to Libya because Italian holding centers are "like concentration camps." The Vatican has also criticized the push-back policy, and publicly expressed its concern over the scourge of human trafficking.

Coast Guard Has Saved Thousands

¶11. (U) Our final meeting on Lampedusa was with the local Coast Guard commander, Achille Selleri, who after two years in his post was clearly overwhelmed by the human tide that had arrived in his corner of the world. "I have seen things I never imagined," he told us, referring to the desperation of the thousands of people whose lives he and his subordinates had saved on the high seas. He observed that 95 percent of the Coast Guard's operations in Lampedusa involved humanitarian rescue. He refused to opine on the political decision to turn migrant boats back, but he was clearly proud of his team's rescue of over 44,000 seaborne migrants in the past two years, almost all of whom he believed would otherwise have perished in unseaworthy vessels and dinghies. He said it was impossible to know how many people drown trying to make the voyage, but guessed that there were a lot who went undetected and never made it to shore. Selleri noted that he had no direct contact with his Maltese counterpart; all such contact takes place through higher channels. Comment: This is an issue because Malta and Italy have frequently argued over which country is responsible for receiving migrants that are rescued in one or the other's agreed-upon search-and-rescue (SAR) area. Only a week prior to our visit, the GOI blocked a Maltese vessel carrying rescued migrants from docking at Lampedusa, and a diplomatic spat ensued in which each country asserted that the other should receive the migrants (who were picked up in Malta's SAR zone but were closer to Lampedusa).

¶12. (SBU) Comment: Embassy Rome is preparing a septel on the implications of the GOI's new immigration policies. Since the recent push-back of migrant boats to Libya, there have been no

NAPLES 00000064 004.2 OF 004

further embarkations toward Lampedusa. If nothing else, this will give the holding center the opportunity to repair and rebuild the damage from the February riots. Nonetheless, no one on Lampedusa supports the push-back policy or the proposals to change immigration laws. Most believe that the EU needs to develop a common policy for dealing with seaborne migrants and to allocate funding to deal with the phenomenon. In the meantime, it is possible that people fleeing war and persecution will be unable to find asylum. And pushing migrants back to Libya may turn out to be akin to trying to turn back the ocean tides.

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